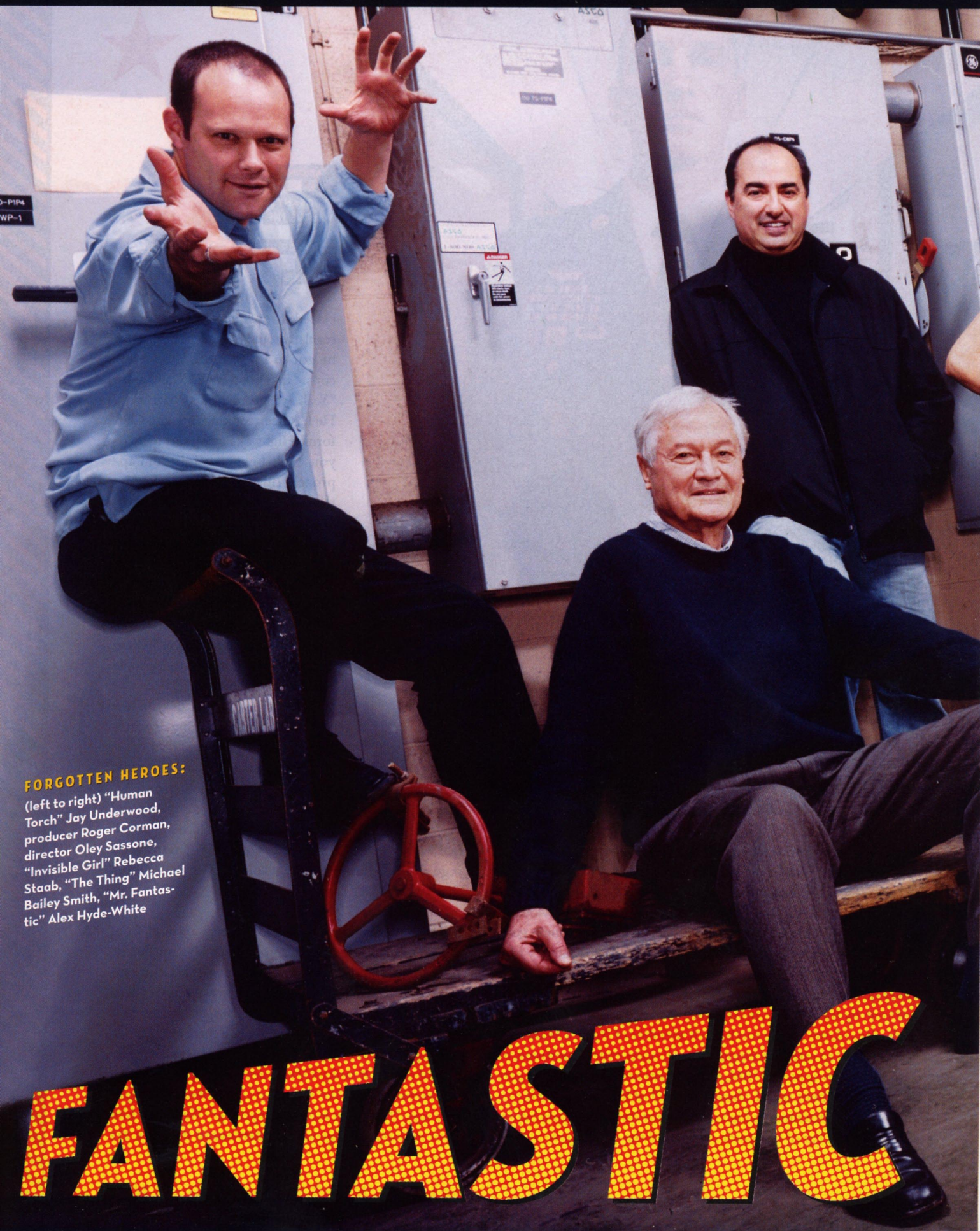
IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME! THE UNHOLY BIRTH AND MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR MOVIE



FORGOTTEN HEROES: (left to right) "Human Torch" Jay Underwood, producer Roger Corman, director Oley Sassone, "Invisible Girl" Rebecca Staab, "The Thing" Michael Bailey Smith, "Mr. Fantastic" Alex Hyde-White

FANTASTIC

MARVEL STUDIOS DOESN'T WANT YOU TO SEE BY ROBERT ITO PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL KELLEY

FAUX!

IT'S

difficult to judge Stan Lee as a storyteller because so much of what he does is not, strictly speaking, literary. As cocreator of the Amazing Spider-Man and the Incredible Hulk and a host of other characters at Marvel Comics, Lee concocted plots and dialogue and masterful sound effects—*Thwipp! Btok!*—but it was artists like Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko who brought the heroes to life with a dramatic pose or a well-drawn grimace. Were the comics great, or were they just drawn great? Lee certainly advanced the language of the medium, expanding young readers' vocabularies with words like *sepulchral* and *fortuitous* and *inexplicable*—but where he excelled was in the imagination and audacity of his stories. A private high school for teenage mutants? A silvery alien who surfs the cosmos seeking planets for his gigantic master to devour, then falls in love with a verdant world, Earth, that his lord wants to eat? Genius.

The tale that Lee is telling this morning, however, has neither silvery aliens nor world-eating villains. It is a Hollywood story. Sitting in his Beverly Hills office surrounded by comics and Spider-Man memorabilia, Lee has the deep tan and large tinted glasses of a Palm Springs retiree. At 82, after a lifetime spent building a pop culture empire, Lee is describing the bizarre saga of a movie based on *The Fantastic Four*, his groundbreaking comic about a bickering, dysfunctional team of superheroes. Lee created the series with Jack Kirby in 1961, the inaugural book in what would come to be known as the Marvel Universe. This summer, on Hollywood's all-important July 4 weekend, Fox will release a big-budget movie based on the series. Today, though, Lee is talking about a far different movie, one made more than a decade ago.

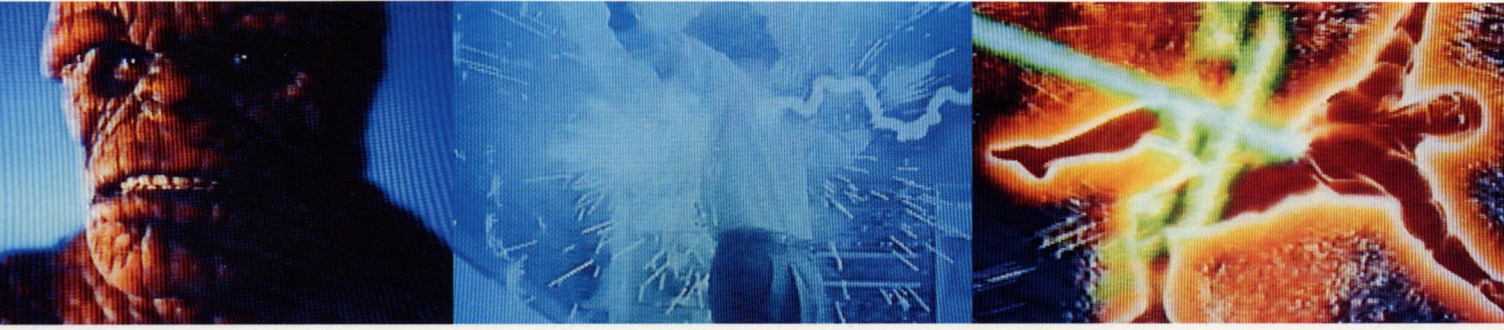
"That movie," says Lee, "was never supposed to be shown to anybody." He peers out from behind his sunglasses, his voice a mix of laughter and gravel. "This fellow had the rights to do the Fantastic Four movie for, like, 15 years, and finally the option was due to lapse. If he hadn't begun principal photography by December, he would lose that option. And he still wanted to make that movie! So he figured he would bat out a fast movie for a dollar-ninety-eight budget just so he could keep that option." Lee's smile drops. "The tragic thing," he says, drawing out his words, "is that the people involved with the film were *not aware* that that movie was never supposed to be shown to anybody." He pauses. "Do you see? It was never supposed to be seen by any living human beings."

Hollywood has created thousands of movies that never made it into theaters. Many go straight to video; others are so bad they can't find a buyer. *The Fantastic Four* is a far rarer case because it was a ploy, not really a film at all, a backroom deal masquerading as a movie. While other films have earned "lost classic" status because their subject matter was controversial (Jerry Lewis's 1972 Nazi death camp drama *The Day the Clown Cried*) or because the film itself has dissolved (most of 1924's *Greed* and countless other silents), *The Fantastic Four*—one of Hollywood's strangest lost classics—was neither controversial nor truly lost. It was buried.

Lee's account is pretty much the accepted one, the one told in Hollywood circles and repeated over the years in books and magazines and on Internet fan sites. "This fellow," the man with the option, was German producer Bernd Eichinger; the filmmaker enlisted to churn out the fast, cheap version in 1992 was Roger Corman, Hollywood's celebrated "King of the Bs," the pioneer famed for popularizing several film genres (gangs on bikes, women in prison) and an inspiration for the independent film movement. The tragedy, according to Lee, was that nobody bothered to tell Corman or the cast and crew—who struggled mightily to bring the film in on time and on budget—that the entire production was a sham.

Like many other Hollywood tales, finding out what really hap-

1993 CAST: ILONA LIEBERMAN; 2005 CAST: NELS ISRAELSON/TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX



pened depends on who's telling the story. Ask ten different players—from Eichinger and Corman and Marvel Studios to the director and the cast and crew—and you'll get ten different versions. Many remain mystified about what took place and are anxious to know why the powers that be couldn't have just told them from the start that Eichinger's option would be lost if a film wasn't made. In the meantime, the "original" *Fantastic Four*—the film that was never supposed to be shown to anybody—has become a legend among Marvel fans and cult film aficionados, a fable fueled by the countless illegal copies that sprout up on eBay and at comic book conventions. Online fans and critics dissect every detail of the movie, with reviews ranging from "charming" to "one of the worst films ever made." Marvel is doing its best to make sure that the film stays little more than a rumor, at least until after its big summer release, the "real" *Fantastic Four*, hits theaters.

As dirty tricks go, the fate of the first *Fantastic Four* is top-drawer stuff. Corman has made more than 450 movies, with credits including *Night of the Blood Beast* and *Death Race 2000*. But it's *The Fantastic Four* that he calls "the strangest film production I've ever been involved with in my life."

TWO BY FOUR: Scenes from the 1993 movie (above) and its cast (below); a promotional photo for the 2005 film (bottom)

WHEN LEE AND KIRBY

dreamed up *The Fantastic Four*, Marvel was an upstart in the superhero genre. DC Comics had made a fortune with characters like Superman, Batman, and the Flash, good-looking, square-jawed men without discernible problems or personality flaws; the Fantastic Four, by contrast, had quirks and neuroses galore. Mr. Fantastic, the limb-stretching leader, was an unlikable stiff. His then girlfriend (and future wife), the Invisible Girl, had a really visually unappealing superpower. The Human Torch was cool—what kid wouldn't want to be able to burst into flame and hurl blazing fireballs?—but the Thing was a misshapen, grumpy orange golem who, as it happened, hated Mr. Fantastic. While other heroes inhabited fictional cities, the Four lived and worked and bickered in Manhattan, on the corner of 42nd Street and Madison Avenue. The superheroes didn't even have costumes until the third issue, when identical blue bodysuits were fashioned for everyone but the Thing, who sported large, skintight shorts.

The series was an instant hit. Unlike the well-adjusted, glamorous superheroes over at DC, these guys were weird. The Thing's battle cry was "It's clobberin' time!" and what kind of superhero said anything like that? Readers wondered if he might just go nuts one day and start ripping off people's arms and legs. The book sparked a revolution at Marvel and in the comics world, leading to the creation of equally angsty, tormented heroes, from the Hulk (no love) to Spider-Man (no parents) to Daredevil (no eyes). Even DC followed suit, releasing comics that dealt with drug addiction and race relations. On the cover of the fourth issue, Lee jokingly declared *The Fantastic Four* THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMIC MAGAZINE! and the honorific stuck.

Before long the Fantastic Four began popping up on TV, at a time when Saturday-morning cartoons were about as good as it got for a comic book franchise. In 1967, Hanna-Barbera, creators of *Yogi Bear* and *The Jetsons*, produced the first series. The animation looked cheap. Eleven years later NBC released *The New Fantastic Four*, replacing the popular Human Torch with an R2-D2 rip-off named H.E.R.B.I.E. the Robot. Viewers were confused by the change, and rumors spread that network executives axed the Torch because they were worried that impressionable kids might set themselves ablaze imitating their hero. The real explanation was, in some ways, even stranger. The Torch was unavailable for the series because Marvel had already broken up the team, selling the character's option to Universal executive Frank Price in 1977.

Universal still had the rights to the Torch in 1983, when producer Eichinger visited Lee in his Los Angeles home and inquired about purchasing the option to the Fantastic Four. A tall, dapper man of 55 who could pass for a royal or an Everest climber and who punctuates his German-inflected English with frequent "do you see"s and "do you

understand"s, Eichinger had made his fortune as CEO of Neue Constantin, Germany's most successful film production company. He loved big international deals and larger-than-life movies—his company produced everything from *The NeverEnding Story* to *Resident Evil* to a sympathetic biopic about Adolf Hitler—and had been a fan of the series, and of Marvel Comics, for years. "When I shook [Lee's] hand I was kind of wobbling," he says. "It was like meeting God." Because of the option problems, however, Eichinger left empty-handed.

Three years later he returned to Marvel, which had since regained the rights to the Human Torch. At that time Marvel was practically giving away its most lucrative characters, hoping that TV and film appearances would improve the company's portfolio. In a fire sale unfathomable in today's era of multimillion-dollar Spider-Man and X-Men franchises, Eichinger obtained the rights to the Fantastic Four, the evil Mole Man, the Silver Surfer—herald to the world-eating Galactus and one of Marvel's most beloved characters—and several other villains and ancillary characters. In 1985, the company sold *Spider-Man*, its most popular franchise, to Cannon Films for a paltry $225,000, probably less than the craft services budget on either Tobey Maguire blockbuster. According to one insider, the rights for the Fantastic Four went for $250,000. Eichinger won't confirm figures but admits that the price was "not enormous."

LOW PRICE LEADER: Roger Corman, legendary producer and master of the shoestring budget

For the next decade Eichinger tried to find backing for a Fantastic Four movie. Warner Bros. and Columbia expressed interest, but Marvel superheroes were still an untested property in the '80s; *Spider-Man*, in development limbo for years, wouldn't be released until 2002. The price tag to make the movie, of course, was another concern, with estimates ranging from $50 to $150 million. Putting a single superhero on film, with all the required stunt work and special effects, was one thing—but four?

With his option set to run out on December 31, 1992, and few backers in sight, Eichinger approached Marvel about extending his contract. "They didn't want to prolong it," he says, "because they hated the deal, you know? They had realized by then that they could sell Marvel property for much more." DC's successes with the *Superman* and *Batman* franchises had proved the enormous earning potential of superhero films. To retain his option Eichinger needed to get production rolling on a Fantastic Four movie—*any* Fantastic Four movie. An idea came to him, one clever and simple and slightly devious. He wouldn't create the epic he had envisioned for the past nine years—how could he?—but a stopgap. "They didn't say I had to make a big movie," he says.

The producer immediately thought of Roger Corman, whose speed and thriftiness have become Hollywood lore. "Bernd came to me in September with a very strange story," Corman says. Eichinger explained his quandary to Corman and asked for his help. Corman crunched the numbers over the weekend and came up with a million-dollar budget for the entire production. With the end-of-year deadline only three months away, Corman wanted to start filming as late as possible so that he could have every possible day to prepare. He suggested December 31, the very day the option was due to lapse. "[Eichinger] said, 'No, that would be too obvious what I'm doing—why don't we start shooting on December 26?'" Corman says. "I told him, 'It's gonna be pretty obvious whether it's December 26 or December 31.'" Principal photography began on December 28.

Now came the task of assembling a cast and crew to populate this Potemkin village. The job of director went to Oley Sassone, son of hair product mogul Vidal Sassoon and actress Beverly Adams. Sassone had directed dozens of music videos through the '80s and '90s, fine ones, too, as well as a Don "the Dragon" Wilson vehicle for Corman called *Bloodfist 3: Forced to Fight*. But this was something different, something big. Imagine: One moment you're in the studio directing the "Broken Wings" video for Mr. Mister; the next you're getting the call to make a full-length action movie based on a huge comics franchise, one that you've loved since you were a kid growing up in New Orleans. "I didn't even need to think about it," says Sassone.

Auditions were quick. Corman wasn't looking for A-listers, not for the $3,500-a-week he was offering. Alex Hyde-White, a British-

CORMAN: MICHAEL KELLEY

born actor who had had small roles in a couple of prominent films—he was the polo-playing son of Ralph Bellamy in *Pretty Woman*—got picked to be Mr. Fantastic. The part of the Invisible Girl went to Rebecca Staab, a model and former Miss Nebraska. Jay Underwood, who played the titular character in the 1986 film *The Boy Who Could Fly*, was selected to play the Human Torch. The baby on the set—albeit a huge, brawny baby—was Michael Bailey Smith, a former offensive tackle for the Dallas Cowboys. He was cast as Ben Grimm, who became the Thing. This would be his second movie.

Much of the shooting took place in Venice, on the Concorde Studios soundstages that Corman had converted from a rotting lumberyard in 1980. Rats and bugs shared the hallowed halls with the specters of actors and directors past. James Cameron had been here that inaugural year, creating the walls of a spaceship out of McDonald's hamburger containers; Angie Dickinson took bubble baths and raised her gun-toting kinfolk here in *Big Bad Mama II*. The others who had learned their craft under Corman through the years—Jack Nicholson, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Ron Howard, Peter Fonda—were here in spirit, laughing about Corman's legendary cheapness and awestruck at how far they had come.

All of which made the leaky roofs, closet-size dressing rooms, and craft services bologna sandwiches that much easier to overlook. Sure, the sets had been recycled from past movies, and the costumes were crude, the stitching visible, the fit saggy in spots. But Hyde-White and the others were leads in this Marvel movie, and how many Hollywood greats had gotten their start in Corman productions just like this? Even the budget, by Corman standards, was not that bad; *Carnosaur*, an ambitious *Jurassic Park* rip-off starring Diane Ladd, would be made at Concorde months later for a lot less. "We knew what the history was to this piece," says Underwood, "and we knew that if we did our best here, that this could be good for all of our careers."

The crew shot for 21 days, crash-landing a spaceship in Agoura, blowing up a lab on the Loyola Marymount campus, and holding meetings at the team headquarters in the old Pacific Stock Exchange downtown. Lee visited the set on several occasions, chatting with Sassone and pumping up the cast. "Lee walked up to me and he goes, 'When I created this character, you are that person I envisioned,'" says Smith. "I thought that was really cool." The mood—despite 12-hour days—was exuberant. "We had Neue Constantin and [Eichinger] and Concorde Studios and Roger all there," says Hyde-White. "We felt we were making a real movie."

Postproduction lasted for several months. Composers David and Eric Wurst pitched in $6,000 of their own money to record the soundtrack with a 48-piece orchestra at Capitol Records. Sassone cut the film at night, borrowing equipment while working on other jobs. "Guys were loaning us cameras...just so we could get it finished," says Sassone.

THE

film lives on through DVDs passed around by curious fans. *The Fantastic Four* is faithful to the comic, and anyone who has read the Lee-Kirby comic or seen the cartoons will recognize their heroes. College student Reed Richards is working with pal Victor Von Doom on a machine that will harness the power of Colossus, an enormous energy field from outer space. The attempt fails, and Von Doom's face is horribly scarred when the machine explodes in a fury of sparks and smoke. Ten years later Richards convinces three others to travel with him into space: Ben Grimm, the excitable Johnny Storm, and Johnny's sister, Susan, who had a crush on Richards when she was around 13 and is now, much to Richards's surprise, all grown up and really hot. Von Doom, who has since become the evil Dr. Doom, plots to sabotage their spacecraft. Cosmic rays flood the ship, giving the astronauts different superpowers. The Fantastic Four battle Doom, who is planning to—what else?—rule the world.

Fun and earnest and sometimes campy, the film is better than other Marvel movies that actually did get released in the '80s and '90s, cinematic crimes like the Dolph Lundgren feature *The Punisher* or 1991's *Captain America*, considered by many to be the worst Marvel movie of all time. There is the occasional cornball dialogue, but comic books are often full of lines that are perfect for the printed page but tough to sell on film. The pace is fast, so the story never drags.

Many of the effects, however, are laughably cheap. When Mr. Fantastic extends his leg to trip some bad guys, you almost expect to hear the *sproing* rubber-band sound effect from the Road Runner cartoons. In other scenes, his stretching » CONTINUED ON PAGE 218

Fantastic Faux!

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 111 » arm is clearly just a glove attached to a long pole. The Invisible Girl's disappearing act is little more than the blinking-out effect used in *Bewitched*. The Thing costume is pretty good—its head frowns and smiles and talks, just like the ones created for the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* movies—but the Torch effects are limited. The same flame-throwing shot is reused several times in front of different backgrounds. When the Torch finally does "Flame on!" the film switches from live action to cartoon. "Not to hurt anybody's feelings," says Staab, "but it's cheesy when you look at it now."

The summer of 1993, trailers were placed in movie theaters and on Corman videos like *Carnosaur*. Cast members embarked on a promotional tour, screening clips for SRO crowds at the Shrine Auditorium and signing autographs at Universal CityWalk and the San Diego Comicon. Smith brought the Thing head to events from South Dakota to Michigan to Illinois to Florida; the movie was hyped in *Cinefantastique* and on the cover of *Film Threat*. The world premiere was set for January 19, 1994, at Minneapolis's Mall of America, with proceeds going to the Children's Miracle Network and the Ronald McDonald House. "It was movie-star training," says Hyde-White. "It was my shot at becoming an action star."

And then the awful phone calls began. The film, it turned out, would not be released. "I was totally shocked," says Smith. "Just devastated." Hyde-White, who had been hearing rumors for weeks, went into "denial mode." Sassone heard the news directly from Eichinger. "He explained it the best way he could, because, I mean, look, he knew that we had all worked our asses off on this thing," says Sassone. "Frankly, I think they thought it was just going to be this piece of shit...so I think it kind of unnerved them when it wasn't. I think they felt kind of bad."

Slowly the news about Eichinger's struggle to maintain his option made the rounds. Cast members heard that the producer had never intended to release the movie, that the film was just a way for him to retain the rights so that he could make a bigger film. "It would have been nice if somebody would have said, 'Look, what are you guys doing? There's no intention for this to be released,'" says Smith. "I don't know why they couldn't have been up front with us from the beginning."

FINDING OUT the specifics of why the movie was made and why it was buried and—here's the big one, at least for the director and the cast and crew—what happened to the film itself is like being caught between games of dodgeball and hot potato. Some say it was never meant to be seen by anyone; others that the decision to kill it came only after the film was completed. To complicate matters, both Eichinger and Lee are producers on the new film and reluctant to say anything that might keep people from seeing it.

Sassone wasn't told much about the backroom deals. The story he recites is the one he's picked up from the trades and the Hollywood grapevine, basically the Stan Lee version of events: that Eichinger never intended to release the movie. "I don't even know if the film still exists," he says. "They may have burned it. The last I heard was that Roger Corman had it."

"No, I don't have it," says Corman. He had the answer print for 60 days, but then he sold it to Eichinger. "Bernd owns the film," he says. Corman dismisses Lee's claims, citing the film's relatively large advertising budget as evidence that it was slated for release. This makes sense—would a guy who is rumored to have once fired a craft services worker for serving Diet Coke instead of a generic brand blow money on trailers and a promotional tour for a fake film? "Everybody liked the film," Corman says. "We had a contract to release it, and I had to be bought out of that contract."

Eichinger also rejects Lee's version. "No, that's not true," he says. "That's definitely not true. It was not our intention to make a B movie, that's for sure, but when the movie was there, we wanted to release it." He doesn't own the film now, though. Avi Arad, who became an executive at Marvel in April 1993, has it. Given credit for reversing Marvel's run of awful movies with the hit *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* franchises, the Israeli-born former toy designer is now listed as producer on all Marvel films.

"Avi's a very fine guy," says Eichinger, "and he calls me up and says, 'Listen, I think what you did was great, it shows your enthusiasm for the movie and the property, and I tell you what. I understand that you have invested so-and-so much, and Roger has invested so-and-so much. Let's do a deal.' Because he really didn't like the idea that a small movie was coming out and maybe ruining the franchise, you know? So he says to me that he wants to give me back the money that we spent on the movie, and that we should not release it." Eichinger doesn't know what happened to the film after Arad bought it. Did Arad watch the movie, even once? "I don't think so," Eichinger says. "I don't know. I mean, you should ask him."

Arad is producing the new version of the film, and one must go through Marvel publicist Jeff Klein to reach him. When asked to set up an interview with Arad about the original Fantastic Four film, he quickly responds, "Oh, he doesn't talk about that movie." Beat. "Just kidding!" says Klein, who then laughs. He says he'll try to arrange an interview in the next couple of days.

A week passes. Klein is trying to make it happen. Conversations get shorter and shorter; Klein wants to know why an interview with Arad is necessary, since "he had nothing to do with the old movie." Didn't Arad purchase the film from Eichinger in 1993? Yes, he says, almost grudgingly, but he had nothing to do with *the production*. After a few more calls, Klein delivers the bad news. "I don't think we're going to be able to make that happen," he says. His voice is just as chipper as on the first call. "It's just not something he's interested in talking about. He doesn't want to talk about the old movie. It's all about the new movie! That's looking back, you know. He's looking forward!"

In the meantime, Lee is invited to take part in a photo shoot with the original cast. He is told how much it would mean to those guys. "Glad to do it," he replies in an e-mail. Klein contacts Lee the next day. The following day, Lee writes that he's reconsidered and decided to decline the shoot. "With the new Fantastic Four movie coming out," he writes, "I'd rather not be associated, in any way, with the old one."

Oof! Marvel buried the film more than a decade ago, making sure that it wouldn't be shown even on the Sci Fi Channel at 3

a.m., and the company still treats it as if it were something shameful, something one might catch, like consumption. Tim Burton's *Batman* blew up in 1992, and nobody sweated the campy '60s TV show or all those awful *Superfriends* episodes or tried to pretend that the Jap-slapping 1943 film *The Batman* had never happened. They figured, rightly, that audiences would be smart enough to tell the difference.

So what happened, really? Arad, it turns out, did purchase the film, in 1993. He acknowledged the sale at a 2002 press junket for *Spider-Man*, when he was asked about Corman's *Fantastic Four*. Arad told the gathered reporters that he had bought the film "for a couple of million dollars in cash and burned it." While Arad was visiting Puerto Rico in 1993, a stranger approached him and commented on the Fantastic Four T-shirt Arad was wearing. The man excitedly told him about the upcoming premiere, which was news to the Marvel executive. Concerned that the Corman film might tarnish the property, Arad bought it and ordered all prints destroyed. He has never seen the film.

Eichinger, for his part, had been in talks all along with *Home Alone* director Chris Columbus about doing a big-budget version. The two had spoken before the Corman film was made but were unable to reach a decision because Marvel's hesitance to renew Eichinger's option had put the project in limbo. They were in contact off and on after that. In the end, he made a small fortune simply by going forward with his ploy until someone paid him handsomely to stop. Whether or not Eichinger was planning to release the Corman *Fantastic Four*, he was dreaming of a bigger movie the entire time, even if it meant scuttling the smaller film.

EICHINGER'S stratagem remains unique, unheard of even among Industry professionals who have seen almost every trick. "I'm not saying it never was done before, but I've never seen anything like that," says Don Kopaloff, an Industry veteran of six decades and Stan Lee's agent at the time. "I can imagine the expression on [former Marvel COO Joseph] Calamari's face when [Eichinger] said, 'Okay, we're making the picture with Roger Corman's company,'" Kopaloff says with a laugh. Others note with amusement the huge gap between what Marvel envisioned and what Eichinger intended. "Maybe he complied with what the contract really said," says entertainment lawyer Robert F. Marshall, "but nobody thought that he was going to be making a million-dollar movie."

In 1994, Eichinger finally signed Chris Columbus to make a $40 million adaptation. Over the next ten years other directors—including Peyton Reed, Sean Astin, and Peter Segal—came and went. Several scripts were written, then shelved. Preproduction started in 1996, then stalled. Casting rumors popped up on fan sites—George Clooney is Mr. Fantastic! Jessica Simpson is Sue Storm! Tim Robbins is Dr. Doom! Fans reported every scrap of gossip, much of it coming from Arad himself.

The new film went into production in the fall of 2004, with a reported budget of $90 million. It stars Ioan Gruffudd, Jessica Alba, Chris Evans, and Michael Chiklis. Arad and Columbus are producers, as is Eichinger. Stan Lee, who is listed as an executive producer, makes a cameo as a doorman.

Original Invisible Girl Rebecca Staab was listening to her car radio when a teaser came on the air. "Coming up," the DJ said, "an interview with Michael Chiklis about the biggest movie of next summer!" Ten minutes later another teaser, and then another. "This movie just got bigger and bigger, and I'm like, What movie are they talking about?" she says. "Finally they say *Fantastic Four*, and I'm like, *Aaaaah!*" It's a mock scream, the one she releases, but a scream nonetheless. "That's when it feels like a dagger in your gut. You're like, No, no, that's *our* movie."

It is a testament to the cast and crew that nobody seems overwhelmingly bitter about what happened, at least not now. It would have been a different story if Mr. Fantastic had blown his brains out or drunk himself to death, or if the Invisible Girl had pinned a FUCK YOU MARVEL note on her chest and thrown herself off the Hollywood sign, but nothing like that ever happened. Everybody kept working, in projects from *Charmed* and *Catch Me If You Can* to *Win a Date with Tad Hamilton!* and *Nip/Tuck*. All the magical things they had dreamed about, though, all the great stuff that was going to happen once people saw them as leads in a big Hollywood movie—A-list stardom and the sequels and TV shows that would have followed if the film was a hit—never materialized. And while they may quietly curse the execs that kept them in the dark for so long, no one holds Corman or Lee responsible for what happened. Sassone and the cast members call Corman a lovely guy, a stand-up guy, if a cheap one; Lee is a genius, an inspiration, the Creator, capital *C*.

There are moments, though, when the anger flares. Underwood describes what happened as "the seedy, cheesy side of Hollywood."

"I wish these people would at least have had the fucking decency to say, 'Look, let's at least give this guy a decent copy of his work,'" says Sassone. "Then the guy who made the movie, and all the people who made this film, could at least say, 'Hey, look at this movie,' and they could show it proudly to their family and their friends." He's happy that bootlegs are all over eBay and comic book conventions, bootlegs that Corman calls "theft," that Eichinger says he has no knowledge of, that creators Lee and Kirby watched with friends, years later, in their homes.

The irony is that Sassone's movie is probably bigger in death—or the suspended animation of an eBay DVD—than if the film had been shown in theaters. Chances are, it would have been just another Marvel footnote if Eichinger had kept that January premiere date at the Mall of America, or if Arad hadn't been wearing that Fantastic Four T-shirt in Puerto Rico.

Pamela Senatore, Sassone's manager for the past 12 years, still remembers how awful everyone felt. "Please don't make it sound like everyone has these sour grapes and they've never gotten over it or anything like that," she says, launching into a half-angry, half-"that's Hollywood" account of how her client and the cast *all got screwed*. She uses terms like *dastardly* and *duplicitous* and *userish* and *raw deal*, sounding like an angry, overprotective mom, which she sort of is. "I think, in the end," she says, "it is a story of success in that they didn't let something like that cut them off at the knees and say, 'Screw it, I'm out of here.' Because if anything is gonna do it, that's the kind of thing that does." **LA**